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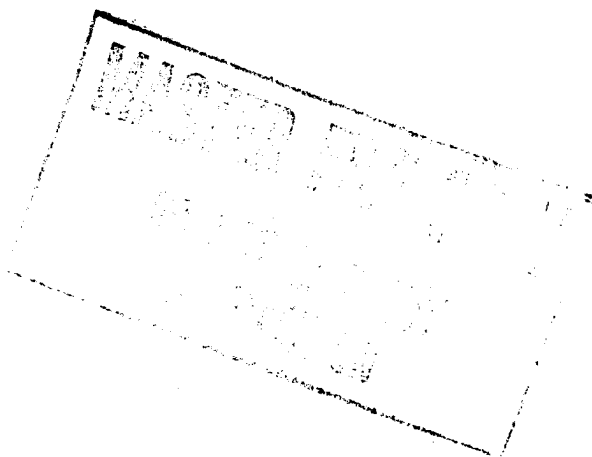
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Tunisia: Moving Toward Crisis

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An Intelligence Assessment



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*NESA 84-10249
August 1984*

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Tunisia: Moving Toward Crisis

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An Intelligence Assessment

This paper was prepared by [] Office of
Near Eastern and South Asian Analysis. It was
coordinated with the Directorate of Operations. []

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Comments and queries are welcome and may be
directed to the Chief, Arab-Israeli Division, NESA,
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**Tunisia:
Moving Toward Crisis**

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Key Judgments*Information available
as of 16 July 1984
was used in this report.*

The prospects for stability in Tunisia are poor. President Habib Bourguiba shows no inclination to address the grievances of disaffected youth and the unemployed, the urban and rural poor, and those wanting to revitalize the Arab-Muslim character of Tunisia. Disorders similar to the economic riots last January could occur with little provocation and accelerate the erosion of government authority.

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Senior officers, struggling to maintain the apolitical character of the armed forces, and moderate leaders of the country's growing Islamic fundamentalist movement continue to be forces for stability. Their strength is eroding, however, under popular pressures for reform. Bourguiba's paternalistic rule has created a sycophantic political elite that has acquired privileges resented by the poor. The aged President's failure to build a constituency beyond this group is encouraging the trend toward radicalization and thus invites foreign, particularly Libyan, meddling.

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Prospects for stability appear even worse should Bourguiba die in office. Bourguiba's constitutionally designated successor, Prime Minister Mohamed Mzali, has shown little ability to build a broad base of support. His blatant efforts to weaken his rivals have damaged his political standing even in official circles, setting the stage for a prolonged and bitter struggle after Bourguiba's death. Such a crisis may prompt the armed forces to step in to secure an orderly transfer of power or to ensure that their own favorite assumes the presidency.

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Opposition to US policies among newly radicalized Tunisians is growing and may soon prompt the government to give additional emphasis to the Arab and nonaligned aspects of its foreign policy. Although ties to the United States and Western Europe probably will remain important for defense support and economic investment, Tunisia's need to demonstrate its nonaligned credentials may push it closer to the Soviet Union in the post-Bourguiba era. This—in the worst case—could jeopardize the unrestricted passage of US naval vessels through the 140-kilometer strait between Tunisia and Sicily. NATO would then have to devote more assets to keeping this vital sea lane open during a confrontation with the Soviet Union.

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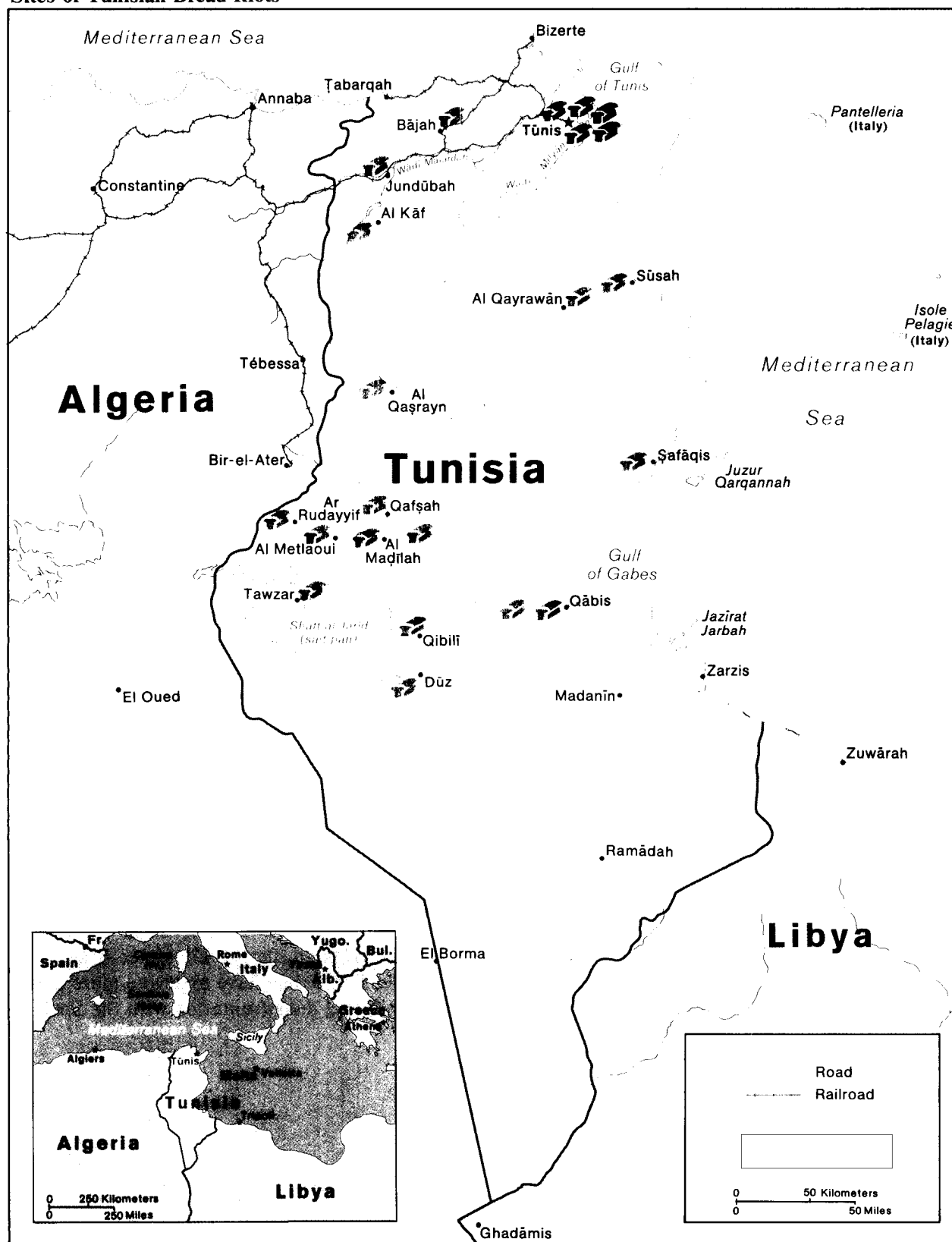
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Sites of Tunisian Bread Riots



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Tunisia: Moving Toward Crisis

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After Tunisia gained its independence from France in 1956, President Habib Bourguiba enacted broad social and economic programs designed to modernize the country at a gradual pace. These policies have brought steady economic growth, a relatively modern social and economic system, and an increasingly Western-oriented lifestyle. They also have generated unrealistic popular expectations for prosperity and opportunity, as well as an uneasiness about the country's national identity, especially among the country's youth. (Over 70 percent of the population is less than 27 years old.) Moreover, as Tunisians have gained broader educational and social benefits, they have chafed under a political system dominated by one man, largely closed to all except Bourguiba's hand-picked elite and increasingly insensitive to public opinion.

Bourguiba has maintained a stranglehold on power, stifling political expression and forcing the government to rule from an increasingly narrow power base. The US Embassy in Tunis reports that ruling group insensitivity to the popular mood led to the decision last year to double the price of bread, the staple of poor Tunisians. The riots that followed in January left hundreds dead or injured and several thousand under arrest, and seriously dislocated economic plans.

The riots highlighted the declining popularity of the ruling Destourian Socialist Party (PSD)—the country's principal political institution. Party leaders failed to anticipate the intensity of the reaction to the price hikes. Moreover, party members did not respond to government efforts to mobilize them to help bring the disorders under control. The riots finally ended when Bourguiba ordered in the Army and rescinded the price increases.

The PSD as an avenue for political participation has been declining for some years. The US Embassy in Tunis reports that the party, founded by Bourguiba in 1934 as the Neo-Destour Party, has developed into an arm of the government serving the interests of a narrowly based clientele. Government and party

members frequently have overlapping responsibilities, and their dispensation of patronage, licenses, and other favors has alienated much of the population. As a result, many Tunisians are searching for alternative institutions to press their demands.

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The Leadership Vacuum

Bourguiba in recent years has, with a few exceptions, divorced himself from the main currents of national life, ignoring Tunisia's growing social and political problems. The 82-year-old President for Life dwells on past achievements and is increasingly out of touch with the forces influencing Tunisian society.

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The political ineptness of Prime Minister Mohamed Mzali—the President's handpicked and constitutionally designated successor—has further hurt government authority. Mzali's failure to fulfill promises to supplement incomes of the poor to protect them from the bread price increases helped trigger the January disturbances. His statements concerning the restoration of the increases—leaked by foreign newsmen—prolonged tensions and further discredited the government.

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Mzali's effort to put the blame for the bread riots on then Interior Minister Guiga, one of his political rivals, further damaged his credibility outside official circles. A Mzali-appointed commission investigating the causes of the riots recommended that Guiga be tried for treason for presumed political disloyalty during the disorders.

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Security forces during the
January bread riots.



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The US Embassy in Tunisia says that poor Tunisians believe the government is unfairly indicting Guiga for his unwillingness to order the killing of protesters. We believe that Guiga misjudged the intensity of the riots and that the poor performance of the security forces clearly exposed operational deficiencies caused by their mismanagement under Guiga.

Tunisians as a proponent of liberalizing Tunisia's one-party system. By 1984 his popularity had eroded severely, and many demonstrators called for his dismissal during the January bread riots.

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The "Corrective" Movement

Despite his growing political difficulties, Mzali is one of the few government leaders who is aware of the depth of the problems Tunisia faces, including the need for political reform, according to the US Embassy in Tunis. Mzali has sought to introduce change and ease discontent through economic development. He apparently shuns political liberalization because it would antagonize the authoritarian Bourguiba and thereby weaken his position as prime minister.

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We are unsure of Bourguiba's attitude toward Mzali, although he apparently intends to retain him as prime minister despite his political liabilities.

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Press reports indicate that Mzali is giving priority to development projects in the poorer southern and western regions, where the bread riots began. Tunisia has lobbied for increased aid on concessional terms from the United States, Canada, Western Europe, Australia, Saudi Arabia, and several regional development organizations. Tunisia also has solicited a loan of \$70 million from France for food imports and balance-of-payments support.

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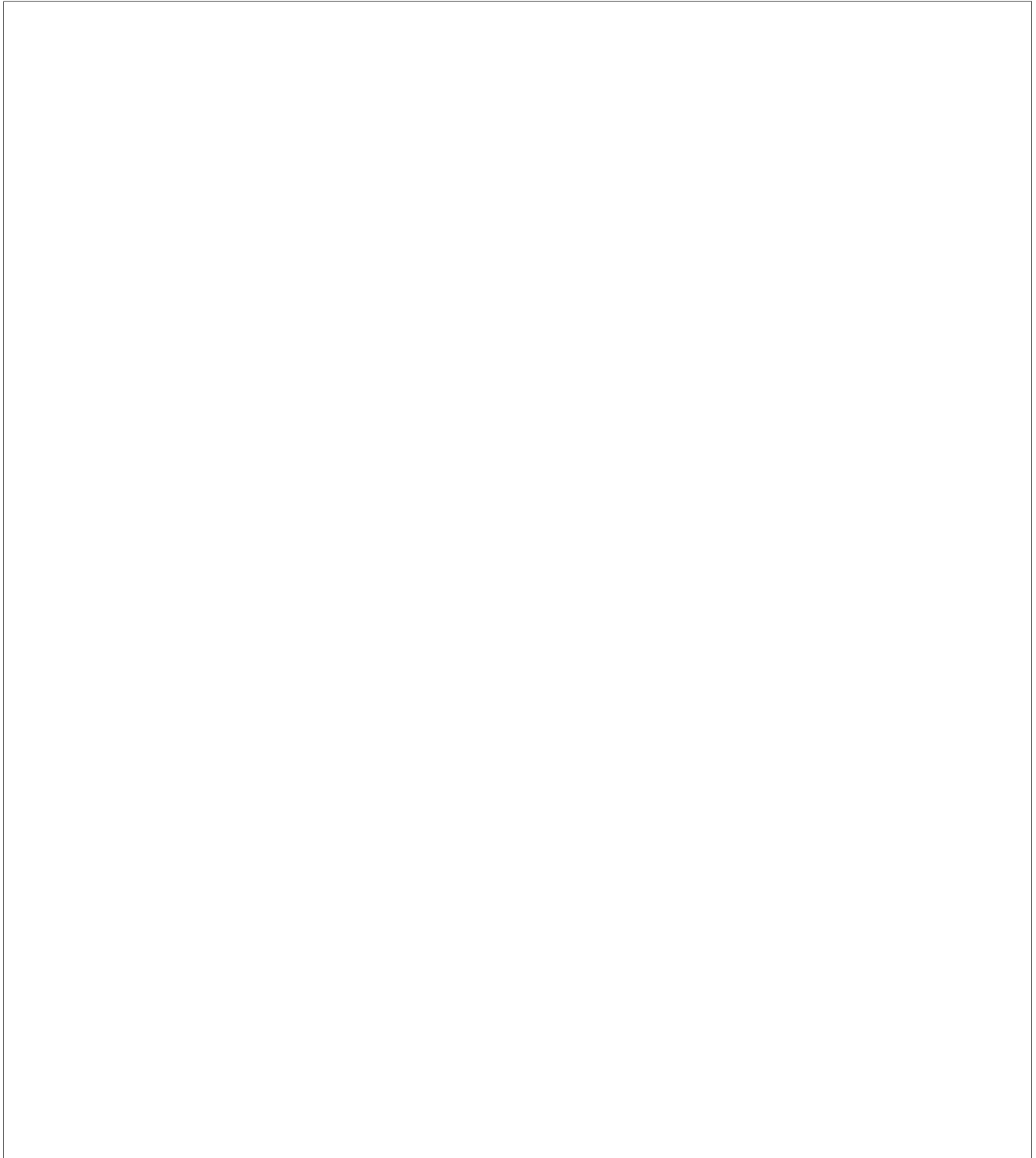
Mzali has never been a particularly popular prime minister since he was appointed four years ago. The US Embassy in Tunis reports that Mzali's standing was especially hurt by popular misconceptions that he, rather than Bourguiba, was responsible for rigging the country's first legislative election in 1981. Mzali until that time had been favorably regarded by many

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Following the disturbances, Mzali revised the budget at Bourguiba's direction to lessen the burden on the poor. The new budget shifts more of the cost of development to the middle and upper classes by

increasing taxes on items such as liquor, cigarettes, and gasoline. It retains most government subsidies on bread and other cereal products.

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The Economy: Cause for Concern

Economic growth in Tunisia has slowed in the past several years. Poor harvests have increased outlays for food imports, which constituted 14 percent of the value of total imports in 1983. The country also has been hurt by the effects of global recession on its key foreign exchange earners—petroleum, phosphates, and tourism. Inflation and rising unemployment are compounding economic difficulties (see chart).

The government's revised 1984 budget probably is too optimistic. Union demands for higher wages, higher-than-anticipated food imports, or lower oil revenues probably will force the government to introduce a supplementary budget later this year.

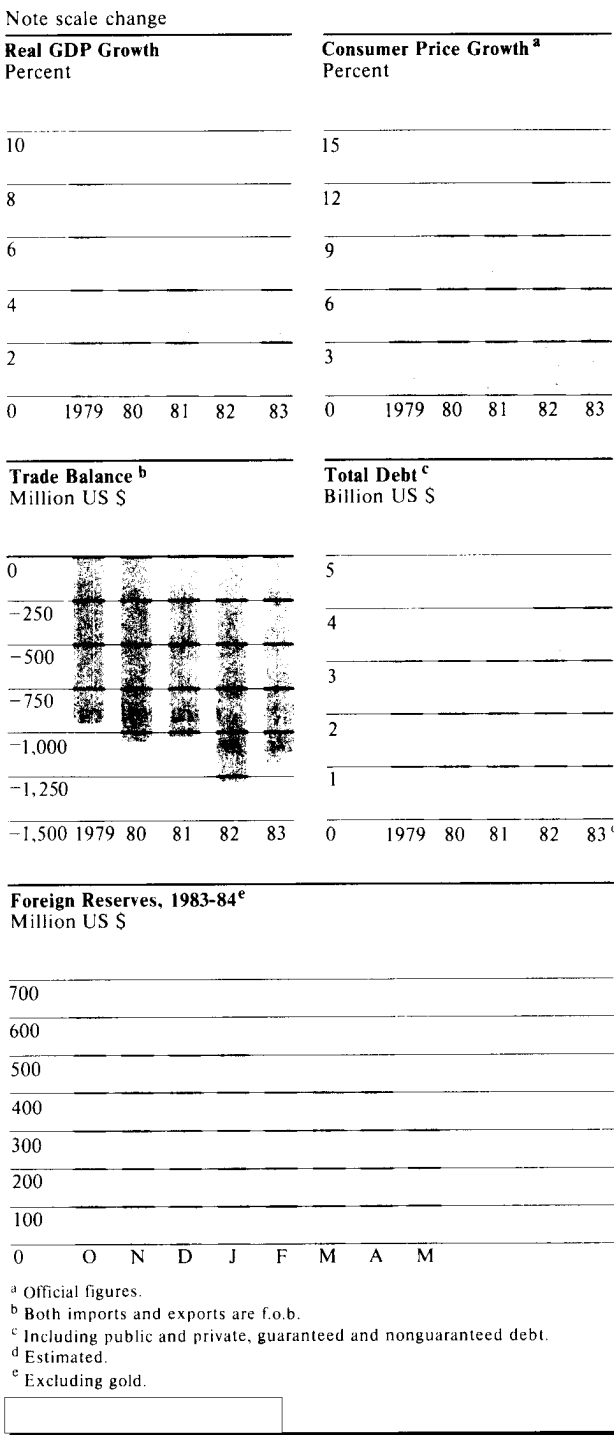
The government then would face difficult political choices. A decision to raise taxes on luxury goods or to cut pet projects in the wealthy northern areas risks alienating the upper and middle class—the government's traditional base of support. Postponing development projects in the south and east probably would fuel discontent among organized labor and the poor. An increase in foreign borrowing—currently projected at \$200 million for 1984—would weaken Tunisia's credit standing and result in more economic difficulties later.

These measures, however, have so far failed to placate the poor. Disadvantaged Tunisians say that Mzali's programs are not working and accuse him of protecting the interests of a corrupt privileged class that siphons off funds meant for them. Moreover, the US Embassy in Tunis reports that poor Tunisians are concerned about the continued erosion of their purchasing power by inflation, a problem they believe the government has ignored. The Embassy says this is causing restiveness among the poor and fostering the view that the government gives with one hand and takes back with the other.

The Opposition—What Next?

Radical Muslims are particularly interested in exploiting discontent because of Bourguiba's long record as a secularist. quasi-legal fundamentalist groups are winning a growing following in the urban slums and countryside; among

Tunisia Economic Indicators, 1979-83



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university students with poor job prospects; and, most dangerously, among lower- and middle-ranking members of the armed forces. Attempts by Tunisian security forces to end fundamentalist activity have so far failed. Members of the mainstream Islamic Tendency Movement (ITM)—the country's largest fundamentalist organization—claim credit for fomenting some of the bread riots last January. []

recurrence, however, of the violent labor protests of 1978, which required Army intervention and the arrest of key labor leaders. []

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Several wildcat strikes early this year prompted UGTT Secretary General Habib Achour publicly to urge negotiations. Achour has so far been able to maintain a delicate balance between representing the workers and cooperating with the government, but without government concessions he will be increasingly hard pressed to maintain worker discipline. []

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Bourguiba's continuing rebuff of ITM demands for legal status, in our view, is eroding the political strength of moderates in control of the organization. Several ITM leaders recently stated publicly that they were having difficulty restraining their younger, more radical members from agitating against the government. The ITM leadership supports policies based on a return to more conservative Islamic doctrines to halt what it regards as the moral decay brought about by Bourguiba's strong secularism. More radical Muslims in the ITM and among other small Islamic extremist groups want to replace the government entirely with religious leaders. []

The Army—Where Does It Stand?

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The officer corps—drawn from the Tunisian establishment—has a strong stake in stability. The swift and effective performance of the Army in suppressing the labor riots in 1978 and the bread riots last January demonstrated its leaders' loyalty to Bourguiba's political order. Moreover, the Army's quick return to the barracks soon after the disturbances subsided illustrated its discipline. []

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[] A recurring need to suppress disturbances, resulting in civilian casualties, would undermine the Army's cohesion and commitment to the regime. The US defense attache in Tunis reports that a group of senior officers has told Mzali that they will not support orders to deploy against unarmed civilians. The officers, in our view, are trying to dissuade Mzali from calling on them again. []

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We believe that Mzali's efforts to strengthen the security forces, including the National Guard, are designed to lessen reliance on the Army during times of unrest. Mzali appointed tough-minded "law and order" men and political loyalists to the posts of director general of National Security and commander of the National Guard shortly after the January bread riots. Tunisian National Guard officers say he also has approved personnel increases for the National Guard and is reequipping and retraining it for riot control. Several hundred Army personnel were transferred to the National Guard two months ago as part of the program, according to the US defense attache in Tunis. []

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The country's trade union leadership is under similar pressure from its more radical members to wring political concessions from the government. The militants within the General Union of Tunisian Workers (UGTT)—the country's main labor union federation—are calling for a more confrontational approach to achieve a more equal distribution of wealth and power between workers and privileged Tunisians. The radicals have sponsored major strikes against the government to achieve their aims. There has been no

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Tunisia's Principal "Forces of Order"

	Strength	Deployment
Army (Leadership reports to Minister of National Defense)	30,000 (14,400 in combat units)	Primarily along the coast and near major urban centers in the north.
Internal Security Forces (Leadership reports to Minister of Interior)		
National Guard	5,500 total	Various cities and border areas.
Intervention Brigade	1,000	
National Police	10,000 total	
Public Order Brigade	4,500	

Mzali's efforts are unlikely to strengthen the internal security forces significantly in the near term.

Prospects

There is little likelihood either that Tunisia is in for an economic boom or that the ruling elite is going to share its power and wealth. The domestic scene, therefore, is likely to become more volatile over time, providing opportunities for extremist Muslims and radical leftist trade union members to gain influence and for foreign states such as Libya to promote instability. In the worst case, the militants in Tunisia's labor and Islamic movements will take control of their organizations or establish independent groups with broad appeal. This would endanger the fragile wage

Succession Politics

Maneuvering among party and government officials for the right to succeed Bourguiba began after he suffered a major heart attack in 1967. Prime Minister Mzali's predecessor in office, Hedi Nouira, proved unable to develop the base of support that would have enabled him to withstand challenges by rivals during a succession crisis. Prime Minister Mzali, however, firmly established himself as the front-runner by late 1983 after two years of maneuvering. Exploiting Bourguiba's increased confidence in him, the Prime Minister purged several important political opponents, including the proteges of Bourguiba's wife, Wassila, who is a bitter foe of Mzali.

The Tunisian Constitution, promulgated by Bourguiba, supports Mzali's bid to establish himself as the heir apparent. Under the Constitution, in the event of a presidential vacancy, the prime minister assumes the functions of the presidency for the remainder of the term of the National Assembly—which currently runs until November 1986. If the prime minister is incapacitated, next in line are the president of the National Assembly and the Minister of Justice. Presidential candidates for a new term must be approved by a government commission and then run against each other in a nationwide popular election. This process has never been tested.

agreements between labor and government and probably result in disorders, sporadic terrorism against symbols of government authority, and intervention by the armed forces.

Bourguiba's stubborn resistance to reform is generating the political climate conducive to such disorders. The inept leadership of Mzali has made him the immediate target of discontent, but Tunisia's social and political problems go beyond Mzali to the authoritarian order established by the President. If Mzali were dismissed as prime minister—and this appears doubtful in the near term—Mzali's successor would be likely to encounter similar difficulties in

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Averting Crisis:***Bourguiba Commutes Death Sentences***

President Bourguiba's decision to commute the death sentences for eight young men convicted of killing two passers-by during the bread riots precluded a new outbreak of civil disturbances. The death sentences generated popular appeals for clemency, a formal protest by the Tunisian Human Rights League, and demurral from virtually all opposition groups, including the Islamic Tendency Movement. Tunisian lawyers—part of the regime's traditional base of support—publicly accused the government of flouting the law during the trial. [redacted]

Statements by government officials highlighting their insensitivity to the plight of a number of demonstrators on trial heightened the prospects for unrest, in our view. Prime Minister Mzali accused critics of the regime's tough law enforcement policy of "pretending to forget the victims—and only concentrating on the severity of the judgments and sentences." The judge who handed down the death sentences, meanwhile, minimized the importance of popular opposition. "The dogs may bark," he said, "but the caravan moves on." This statement was reproduced in the journal of the ruling Destourian Socialist Party. [redacted]

We believe that President Bourguiba's decision to commute the death sentences to life imprisonment at hard labor resulted primarily from mounting international pressure. Editorials in the French press condemned the death sentences, and the wife of a former French Prime Minister—a longstanding friend of the Bourguibas—made a personal appeal for clemency, according to the US Embassy in Tunis. These pressures apparently strengthened arguments against the death sentences by an influential minority of government officials led by Foreign Minister Caid es-Sebsi. [redacted]

gaining political credibility. Mzali's removal, however, might temporarily ease discontent and position a leader with stronger political skills to assume the presidency if Bourguiba died soon after the new prime minister was appointed. [redacted]

We believe that Bourguiba's death or incapacitation and Mzali's succession could ignite popular protests. There would also be bitter political squabbling within official circles. The US Embassy in Tunis reports there is increasing discussion among some Tunisians of military intervention, and we believe that, if a succession crisis were prolonged, there would be direct military participation in the political process. [redacted]

Worsening domestic problems in Tunisia almost certainly will stimulate Libyan troublemaking. [redacted]

[redacted] Qadhafi may already be urging radical Muslims to cause trouble. Recent antiregime demonstrations at Tunis University were sponsored by a radical fundamentalist faction sympathetic to Libya. [redacted]

Implications for the United States

The US Embassy in Tunis reports that resentment toward US policies in the Middle East among increasingly radicalized young Tunisians is growing rapidly. The Embassy says that these attitudes, influenced by Arab arguments of a US bias toward Israel, have begun to affect political debates in official circles. Tunisian leaders cannot afford to ignore this body of opinion. These attitudes have resulted in increasingly vitriolic attacks on US policies in the Tunisian press—even in government-controlled publications. Tunis's role as headquarters of the Arab League means that these statements carry more weight in Arab circles than Tunisia's small size and population would merit. [redacted]

We believe the Tunisian Government may soon begin withholding some diplomatic support for the United States and strengthening its pro-Arab and nonaligned posture in response to those domestic pressures. Tunisia's continued dependence on US military and economic assistance—it has received over \$1 billion in

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US economic aid since 1956—militate against stronger anti-US actions any time soon. Tunisian military officers are well disposed toward the United States, and Bourguiba himself has often referred to the US Sixth Fleet as Tunisia's "shield in the Mediterranean." [redacted]

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Although less likely, Tunisia's need to demonstrate its nonaligned credentials may push it closer to the Soviet Union in the post-Bourguiba era. This—in the worst case—could complicate US strategic planning in the region. US contingency planning for a NATO–Warsaw Pact war presumes uninterrupted naval movement between the eastern and western Mediterranean through the Sicily Strait, the 140-kilometer passage between Tunisia and Sicily. A Tunisian regime that allows substantial Soviet access to Tunisian facilities would compel NATO to devote more assets to keeping this vital sea lane open during wartime. Soviet Navy ships are now permitted port calls and use of Tunisian ship repair facilities under a commercial agreement.

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